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ABSTRACT

Higher education in the Netherlands is divided into three sectors: traditional universities; schools for higher occupational education, known as "hoger beroepsonderwijs," or HBOs; and the Open University, which offers both university and HBO degrees for students unable or unprepared to attend traditional institutions. The HBO system, having evolved from guild courses in the 19th century, was formally established in 1963. By 1983, there were 348 HBOs, but it had become evident that many of the institutions were too small to have any managerial strength and too restricted in course offerings. Subsequent policy changes mandated that HBOs achieve minimum enrollments of 600 students through institutional mergers, that they operate with increased autonomy, and that they increase efficiency. To determine issues associated with the mergers, related literature was reviewed and three HBOs representing different approaches to the merger process were visited and interviews were conducted with rectors and other high-ranking administrators. Based on the literature and interviews, the three institutions all experienced a certain psychological difficulty adjusting to the mergers, although there were definite advantages to the process, such as increased autonomy regarding the use of resources, personnel policies, and the educational process. In general, all three institutions benefited from the process, suggesting that this type of consolidation might also be beneficial for institutions in the United States. Contains 12 references. (BCY)

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Vocational and Technical Education in the Netherlands: Changes and Challenges

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Vocational and Technical Education in the Netherlands: Changes and Challenges

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of The Council for the Study of Community Colleges, held in conjunction with the annual conference of the American Association of Community Colleges, Miami, FL, April 25-25, 1998.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education in the Netherlands in 1997 appears cleanly divided into three sectors: universities, schools for higher occupational education (in Dutch --- "hoger beroepsonderwijs" or HBOs), and the Open University. Universities provide liberal education and prepare students for work in academic or professional settings, HBOs offer knowledge and skills needed as practitioners in many fields, and the Open University provides both types of education to a different group of people: non-traditional students who wish to earn their college degree through part-time study or distance education. There are presently 13 universities, 78 HBOs, and the Open University operating in the Netherlands (Stannard & Warmenhoven, 1994).

This paper is about the changes and challenges of the HBOs. The HBO sector was restructured beginning in 1983 for a number of reasons. It is a success worthy of

note by those interested in institutional change at the system level. The first part of this paper presents a brief history of higher education in the Netherlands and the structure of the country's educational system. The next part discusses the situation leading to the proposed restructuring and chronicles the plan and the changes which took place in the HBO sector. Lastly this paper examines the reorganization in retrospect. What unexpected developments occurred during the reorganization? What problems arose and how were they handled? What advice would those involved offer others in the area of system change?

HISTORY

The universities in the Netherlands go back to 1575 from the founding of the University of Leiden to the most recent founding in 1976 of the University of Limburg. The largest enrolls about 23,000 students (the University of Amsterdam) and the smallest approximately 5,600 (the Wageningen Agricultural University) with average enrollment around 12,000 (Stannard & Warmenhoven, 1994, p. 26). Nine of these universities offer courses in traditional disciplines, three focus mainly on engineering and natural sciences, and one is an agricultural university. Three of the traditional universities are denominational: one is Christian and two are Catholic. The Netherlands also has eight institutions which operate independently of the Ministry of Education and Science, awarding equivalent degrees in business and theology.

The Open University, serving approximately 54,000 students, operates under the Higher Education and Research Act of 1993, coordinating programs with universities

and HBOs. It serves adults unable to attend traditional higher education institutions due to lack of formal qualifications, work, or family obligations. Its open admissions policy and distance education features enable most anyone to study courses one module at a time from home. Counseling services, examinations for credit, and special classes requiring laboratories are housed at 18 centers across the Netherlands. A student of the Open University may earn either a university or HBO degree.

HBOs, or "hogescholen" offer a vocational degree and a type of higher education known as "Hoger Beroesponderwijs." Vocational education grew dramatically in the Netherlands beginning with a trade school in Amsterdam, founded in 1861 (OECD, 1994, p. 11). At their peak there were once over 400 HBO institutions. Due to changes discussed in this paper there are now 78 (Stannard & Warmenhoven, 1994). Vocational education by definition is generally a product of the 20th century. In 1963 vocational higher education in the Netherlands was formally acknowledged through the introduction of the Secondary Education Act.

STRUCTURE OF THE SYSTEM

In the Netherlands, education is broken into parts according to student age. All children attend primary school from the age of four until the age of twelve. At that time they move to secondary education and choose one of two main paths: general or vocational education. This choice is informed by tests and the recommendations of teachers and parents. After secondary school those wishing to pursue their education

have four types of schooling from which to choose. For those who complete their HBO or university degrees, there is further study available in some post-graduate programs.

During the first one or two years of secondary education, general courses are taught in both the general and vocational schools. This gives students an opportunity to think about their choices and test their abilities. The first type of general education is pre-university education (VWO), taking six years. It is indented for students who wish to pursue a university degree and serves as a foundation for liberal learning. Some students choose to attend the HBO after their VWO education. Next is upper general secondary education (HAVO) which takes five years to complete. From here students may enter either the HBO or the VWO for further preparation before a university education. Lower general secondary education is next (MAVO) lasting four years. These students may enter upper vocational secondary education (MBO), or move into the HAVO. Last is preparatory vocational education (VBO), also taking four years. These student may also move on to the MBO, or they may proceed into an apprenticeship training program.

The first year of education at any of the post-secondary level schools is known as the propedeutic year, after which the intermediate examination or propedeuse are taken. This year of study, similar to the first year or secondary school, assures the student, parents, and educators that the student is pursuing the right line of study for his interests and abilities. Students are encouraged to transfer to a different type of education if the examination shows he or she is better suited for a different line of work. Students who complete the MBO program sometimes move into the HBO to study

further, and HBO graduates may pursue further education at either the university, or through a post-HBO program. University students wishing further study generally enroll in a post-doctorate program at the university.

CHANGES

Policy has both affected and responded to the changing conditions of vocational education in the Netherlands. Until 1818, vocational education was conducted primarily within the guilds. When guilds ceased to exist, night schools were established, but these schools were limited in scope and inconsistent in quality (Goedegebuure, 1992b). Trades best learned in a school setting were offered in winter schools. By 1900, 20,000 students were participating in some form or vocational/occupational training. Of these, 70 percent attended evening classes (OECD, 1994, p. 11). OECD (1994) cites specific factors which occurred and contributed to the development of vocational education during the 1900s: compulsory education for children and the prohibition of child labor, changes in employment structure, an increase in attendance, and the expansion of the apprenticeship program (pp. 12-13). The Occupational Education Act of 1921 was interested in supporting education "to train students on the basis and with the continuance of general education for crafts, trades, the shipping industry, domestic work, rural home economics and domestic crafts" (OECD, 1994, p.. 11). This included both structured classroom educational experiences and apprenticeship programs.

Much like the United States, questions were raised about differences between liberal academic education and vocational training and concerns existed about the low prestige given non-university education. Sanderson (1993), discussed historical reasons why non-vocational training had more prestigious. He explained how liberal education in Victorian times conjured up images of Oxford, Cambridge, and the Scottish Universities. It was education for the discipline of the mind, an end it itself, narrowly focusing on the most difficult of subjects. This kind of approach required money, therefore only the wealthiest students were able to experience the rigors of the university. Institutions themselves found it less expensive to offer liberal education. If they were free from the expense of research and the cost of equipment, they could be free of public support and therefore operate independently, picking and choosing students based on their own standards. Liberal education was also attractive because it had an air of mystery and presumed that a mind trained in abstract subjects was better able to apply itself flexibly and creatively in other areas. It offered a connection to church, empire, virtue, and public service.

To address these concerns, vocational higher education was formally acknowledged in 1963 through the introduction of the Secondary Education Act. This was done to "integrate the provision of education with the exception of primary and university education (OECD, 1994, p. 13). Changes were implemented to establish more paths for vocational education, and to ensure that vocational education was not a dead end. This Act focused on the desire for equity between the university and non-university systems. During this time more general academic subjects were introduced

along with vocational education. Teaching methods were more like those used in general education. Even the skills were taught with a more general approach (OECD, 1994).

Changes in society, industry, government, and higher education precipitated an interest in the reexamination of the HBO sector and its place in the Dutch system of higher education. The rise in HBO enrollment and the costs incurred by the government for the operation of these schools inspired a number of discussions and papers. In 1983 the minister for Education and Science published the 'Scale-enlargement, Task-reallocation and Concentration (STC) paper' in an attempt to place the HBO sector in a stronger position within the system. Goedegebuure (1992b, p. 59) lists the primary objectives of the STC restructuring:

> - a considerable increase in size through mergers of institutions;
>
> - an increase in institutional autonomy with regard to the use of resources, personnel policy and the structuring of the educational processes;
>
> - an increase in institutional efficiency through economies of scope.

This paper laid out the proposed changes for the HBOs, but not the way in which these changes should be implemented. The amalgamation of institutions, increase in institutional responsibility, and increased efficiency from institutional size were guidelines, but the process used to implement this was left to the institutions themselves. The HBOs were also given other freedoms. They were allowed to set up programs without government consent and they were encouraged to implement their

own self-evaluations and maintain their own quality controls (OECD, 1994). The logistics of the restructuring was left to the institutions themselves. The goal was to develop "a limited number of multi-purpose, medium-sized institutions with considerable autonomy (Goedegebuure, 1992a; Goedegebuure, 1992b, p. 60). These institutions were given a period of 2 1/2 years to comply. This meant a new finance system and legal system had to be implemented by the 1986-87 academic year.

The STC white paper called for upgrading. Institutions in the early 1980s were considered too small to have any managerial strength and too restricted in course offerings. Power would come from mergers. HBOs could occupy a space equal to that of the universities. Mergers had been common in higher education for many years, constructing and reconstructing systems. The mergers in this case were of interest to several organizations and groups who wanted to place the HBO sector in a stronger position within the Dutch education system. In 1983, the year the STC white paper was published, there were 348 HBOs. The smallest had 50-60 students and the largest enrolled 5,000. Subject fields varied widely. Some schools taught only one discipline or subject field. Now they were mandated to maintain a minimum enrollment of 600, operate with one unit of administration per institution, and maintain a 'reasonable distance' between sites. By July of 1987, 314 of these HBO had participated in the merger process (Goedegebuure, 1989).

HBOs operated under the Secondary Education Act from 1963 until 1986. The changes that came about because of the mergers called for a different type of control and funding structure. Thus, the Higher Vocational Education Act (WHBO) was

established in 1986. Maassen and van Vught (1989) gives the highlights of the Act (pp. 17-18). Conditions and objectives are as follow:

> - HBO ('hoger beroepsonderwijs') is a form of higher education and is designed to give a theoretical and practical training for the practice of professions for which higher vocational training is required or desirable;
>
> - it promotes the personal development and functioning in society of its students;
>
> - it is directly accessible to school-leavers from the higher form of secondary education;
>
> The objectives of the HBO institutions are:
>
> - to provide teaching. Institutes may also be given the task of performing (applied) research;
>
> - to contribute to the development of the professions for which they provide training;
>
> - to provide postgraduate courses.

This legislation allowed for funds based on enrollment and on the number of students completing their degrees. Institutions had increased interest in student completion rates. Students were more likely to finish their degree if a job was a good possibility and to ensure this, HBOs began to work closely with local industry. An industry and occupational advisory council was established at the institutional level in an attempt to train students for employers. Vocational skills taught in HBOs eventually ensured the employment of all the nation's youth. HBOs integrated internships into many programs. These on-the-job experiences could last anywhere from a few months to a year and counted toward the degree. Contracts formed between education and business that considered particular competencies and certifications. These attainment

targets cemented the links between business and education. HBOs began to offer instructional programs similar to apprenticeships (OECD, 1994).

METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted in the Netherlands at the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS) at the University of Twente and was largely supported through a grant by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE). The literature review portion of the paper was done at the CHEPS and University of Twente libraries. In addition to a review of the literature, three HBOs were visited and rectors as well as other high-ranking administrators of these institutions were interviewed in accordance to an interview protocol established during the review of the literature. Questions were faxed to the participants in advance, by request, due to possible difficulties encountered with the Dutch to English language translations. These institutions were chosen because they represented varied stages of the merger process and different ways in which the mergers were executed. Interviews of university researchers involved in the merger process were also conducted.

FRAMEWORK

Organizations tend to avoid mergers because they strip the organization of autonomy and change power structures. Mergers upset the status quo (Goedgebuure, 1989). While that is true, such measures are often necessitated by government

intervention, economic conditions, or the changing needs of the community. A framework adopted from European higher education literature and literature on policy implementation was used by Choreic and Saboteur (1986) to study higher education reform in Norway and France. This framework presented three stages of change: the development of policy formation through the examination of current inadequacies in the system and imagining ways to remedy those inadequacies, implementation of change is assigned and conducted, and the changes in program goals and individual institutions are later reformed and revised. This framework was used to define questions for this study which focused on the overall restructuring of the HBOs on a system level and the implementation of the change on an institutional level, and to look at unexpected difficulties and problems encountered as well as unforeseen advantages. It also sought advice for others who may be considering system-wide reorganization. Additionally, questions about institutional identity were asked to better discern the acceptance of the mergers at the community level.

FINDINGS

Restructuring on an institutional verses a system level

Each of the HBO institutions visited talked about the restructuring on an institutional level a bit differently than they did on a system level. One school stressed the idea of "consolidation" rather than "acquision." Here what had been 25 separate schools ten years ago is now "one great institution" with 16,000 students and 1,600 employees. These mergers began after the publication of the STC white paper and

assured the continuance of existing schools which enrolled less than the minimum number of 600 students. The vocational schools in this region enrolled between 200 and 600 students, therefore mergers for these HBOs were involuntary. As an immediate result of the STC white paper, the 25 regional schools merged into three institutions. In 1993 the three institutions resulting from these early mergers further merged into one large one. The purpose of the most recent merger was to solidify and strengthen the competitive position of the new institution. It resulted in one large regionally dominant institution operating at different sites.

Eight small institutions in another region all had average enrollments of between 300 and 400. Mergers were mandatory. All eight merged in name and in management from the beginning, but remained at individual locations until 1996. Approximately 13 courses of study have now been grouped into four areas: economic, technical, health, and social education.

The third institution merged in two steps. Twelve schools were restructured into two clusters based on courses of study. Technical and manufacturing professional education merged with physical therapy and health care, and economic and marketing schools joined together. In addition to these two clusters this HBO also operated a conservatory of music. During the 1991-92 academic year the clusters became one school which meant they had to destructure the reconstructure. Mergers are not easy to orchestrate for many reasons and this merger in two steps aggravated the situation. This institution operates at six locations run like business units. Human resources, personnel, and public relations are combined in one central building. All of the

locations have their own financial manager, but the overall financial management of the school is operated from the administrative building. Plans are underway to expand and, in 1999, bring all of the locations together with the exception of the mucic conservatory.

Unexpected developments

Mergers are an emotional issue. The participation bodies at one institution, formed by staff and students, proved to be difficult partners to negotiate with about the mergers. Comprised of 10-15 people these groups expressed very strong opinions. Not knowing what to expect and imagining the worst made the situation laborious at times. Students and staff were leery of a beaucratic institutional image. The merger of finances caused emotional reactions with the growth institutions less wiling to merge. In growth institutions the faculty enjoyed certain benefits and advantages. Although their salaries did not differ significantly, they resisted the idea of losing control of funds they built up themselves.

"Psychological surprises" were also the most unexpected developments at the second school. People had a difficult time adjusting. Groups which included students worked together to plan changes in facilities, libraries, sports, and student affairs. Faculty and administrators participated in discussions on curriculum and educational instruction. These reports were prepared well in advance of decision-making. Management appeared to be most affected by the personal ramifications of the mergers. The original eight directors found themselves transported into new situations.

None of them lost their positions in the reorganization, but within 2-3 years all eight had left the institution voluntarily.

This psychological aspect was evident in the third institution, as well. The community had strong feelings about the way several of the small schools were operating. Some were perceived as strong and others as weak. Their financial status differed. Although the guidelines from the government necessitated mergers, "fusion is not a rational process," and some of the decisions made on behalf of the institutions affected the view that people had of each other. One administrator described the overall feeling of distress by saying "lots of ambitions were demolished." The negative feelings were resonated in the press and for a year or two this tension cost the institution a number of students.

Advantages of mergers

Administrators at all three institutions agreed about the advantages gained as a result of the mergers. Scale-enlargement increased the autonomy of institutions with regard to the use of resources, personnel policy, and the structuring of the educational process. They no longer had to contend with detailed regulations and control. Financial advantages came as institutions began to combine needs for computers, laboratories, and supplies.

Students benefited with the advent of a broader range of curricular activities including commercial courses, international cooperation, and close ties to business and industry assuring eventual employment. One institution was able to permit students to

choose elements from other faculties in addition to the regularly prescribed module of courses much like choosing electives in the United States. Employees also benefited in the long term as more career opportunities presented themselves in an institution of greater scale.

Overall, the advantage for HBOs at a system level improved their positioning in the Dutch higher education system. HBOs became equal partners to the universities, offering a different but comparable degree option and leaving secondary education behind. They made many of their own decisions with less rules set by the government including the expenditure of funds. They owned their own buildings and decide to construct and finance new ones. They found themselves in a stronger position in matters of local government. A greater managerial strength has developed.

Although there are risks in independence, there are far more benefits. Each year the government continues to reduce the amount of money given to the HBOs so the stronger they are in size and in scope the better able they are to generate their own money and make their own decisions. Becoming self-supporting gives the HBOs increased freedom and gives the community and the students increased choices.

Institutional identities

Unlike the United States where individual two-year colleges search for institutional distinctiveness and promote their institutional identities in their local communities (Ratcliff, 1989; Townsend, 1989), HBOs in the Netherlands focus on program offerings and specific courses. The importance of institutional identity differed

from institution to institution. One school did not feel that overall identity was an issue. "Most people don't feel as if they merged," tells a great deal about the philosophy of this institution. They have what they call an "endorse identity" used by central administration, but the 'brand name' is the name of the course itself. Each site still has its own identity and name, complete with its own logo. This is because students look at the courses they will take and not at the institution they will be attending. This school did not feel there was a need to develop a new forced identity.

The second institution, although operating from different sites, stressed an overall identity from the beginning of the merger. A new uniform logo and letterhead, for instance, were used from the start. Public relations, human resources, advertising, and finances were consolidated immediately. New courses developed in cooperation with one another and computer facilities were planned by representatives from each site. Psychological integration was another goal and they began the mergers by encouraging a few persons to be enthusiastic for each project. Central administration tried to organize events so students and teachers could meet. There were cultural events, sporting events, and a combined study day. There were four or five opportunities each year where everyone saw one another. Although it took time before the new things were accepted, the transition was smooth. Now this institution operates from one central location and its institutional identity continues to grow because everyone sees each other and works together daily.

The third institution offered classes in twenty locations around the area, including one site at the university where chemistry was taught in already existing

laboratories. These locations merged into two clusters which were making strides to form their own identities when one institution was formed. The anticipation of one new building where everyone would be together was expected to make a difference. Administrators found relations between employees improved when they began relocating to central sites and members of all segments of the institution looked forward to the coming changes. They focused on identity as perceived by insiders and not as a type of institutional distinctiveness based on community support.

Future considerations

Administrators from these three merged institutions learned from the experiences of the past fifteen years. One administrator suggested not putting people in places where they do not belong. "As an institution grows larger," he said, "it asks for a different make-up on its executive board." An awareness of the changing needs of the institution should be developed and community leaders with a commitment to the changes should be chosen to guide it.

Another suggested finding two or three things to make the mergers worth doing. With the merger of smaller institutions into a larger one there are increased choices and advantages of larger scale. There are numerous financial incentives and greater opportunities for administrative growth for managers. Faculty, however, may show resistance. Faculty are not always interested in arguments of combining scale for financial reasons, and faculty cooperation makes change easier. Instructors tend to be interested in added value for students, and when the students are enthusiastic teachers

either follow their enthusiasm or at least stop fighting the change. The support of students, therefore, increases support from faculty. Mergers allow more freedom for students to choose courses within the boundaries of their field of study. There are more possibilities for specialization. Better equipment may be purchased do to the increased buying power of the large institution. These things should be explained to students and faculty.

Still another approach recommended at another institution is to run schools, colleges, and universities by managers. The day-to-day business of the institution should not be bothered by a change such as a merger if managers guide the change in a professional way. At this level, people should behave professionally. Teachers should go on teaching and administrators should go on administrating knowing that certain things must be done because of the government's intervention or for the overall good of the institution.

And finally, one spokesperson said, "As institutions we don't learn a lot from past experiences." He continued to explain that mergers have been combined with efficiency measures and the human element has been lost or downplayed. An understanding of organizational psychology would be his recommendation for institutions facing system change. Those attempting future planning may benefit from an understanding of relationships both within institutions and between institutions and outside influences as well as an understanding of the history of such relationships.

LOOKING BACK

Although some vocational education has early roots in the guilds, and some aspects may be traced back to the end of the 19th century, for the most part HBO education is a post-war phenomenon. These institutions have ridden out many of the trends in higher education and responded to the needs of society. During the 1970s student numbers were up and the similarities between university and non-university education were stressed. Now the focus is on the uniqueness of the non-university system (OCED, 1994). Today the Netherlands operate a binary system of higher education. The Bachelors degree offered at the HBO is a true standardized four-year degree rather than the two- or three-year programs awarded previously. HBOs offer approximately 175 full- or part-time programs including: teacher training, agriculture, technical training, health care, commerce, social work, and performing arts (Maassen & van Vught, 1989). The level of knowledge is comparable to university education in some programs, but designed for use by practioners rather than researchers. The demands in the labor market, and by society at large, has increased the value of the HBO degree. Boards of overseers represent community interests and include leaders in business and industry (OECD, 1994).

The STC white paper of 1983 required institutions to conform to certain size and managerial standards and the Higher Vocational Education Act of 1986 changed planning and funding. The decrease in the number of HBOs has resulted in the creation of large schools with greater financial responsibility, much like the universities

(OECD, 1994). Changes occurred in teaching method, governing bodies, finances, legal structure, and in the status of the HBOs.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The Netherlands is currently concerning itself with vocational training which looks at the needs of labor and the economy and is in the best interest of industry, government, and the student. Technical skills are no longer enough. Students should learn knowledge, social skills, and self-motivated learning. Partnerships are improving between industrial firms and educational institutions. This should help combat the new problem emerging in Europe of high unemployment rate coinciding with a lack of skilled workers (Commission on Vocational Training, 1992). Hoekzema (1995) tells about a proposed new law on vocational training and adult education which encourages a global approach to qualifications. It states that "national bodies responsible for the maintenance of the national qualification structure have as a standard to develop an international dimension in Dutch vocational qualifications, which must be routinely compared with foreign vocational qualifications" (p. 301).

In order for innovation to be effective, policy-makers must be both ambitious and ambiguous to appeal to the greatest amount of people (Choreic & Saboteur, 1988). The STC white paper of 1983 was both, mandating change but permitting flexibility in bringing about this change. The institutions examined in the Netherlands approached mergers in ways different from one another but all benefited from their successes.

Their experiences and suggestions may be beneficial for system change in the United States.

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